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ABSTRACT

Examined were relationships between children's popularity and: (1) the types of solutions children generated to common social dilemmas; (2) what they reported they would do in similar situations; (3) their statements regarding conflict participants' intent; and (4) what they expected to happen next in conflict situations. Subjects were 95 children, 4 and 5 years of age, from three private preschools. Findings indicated that, in general, the type of solutions suggested by the children to different social dilemmas and their reports of what they would do in those situations did not differentiate between high, middle, and low peer acceptance groups. However, results indicated that perception of intent and ability to predict the outcome of different social dilemmas may be important skills associated with differences in same-sex peer acceptance. Results also indicated that 4- and 5-year-old boys and girls differed in how they interpreted the situations. Girls were more likely to suggest some specific outcome or make a hypothesis about possible intent; boys were more likely to say they didn't know. An interaction of sex and social acceptance indicates that expectations about outcome and interpretation of intent may differ between popular boys and popular girls. It is concluded that awareness of differences between popular boys and girls is important in determining appropriate goals and interventions for social skills training programs. (RH)

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Social Acceptance and Social Problem-Solving in Preschool Children

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between certain social problem-solving skills and children's acceptance by their peers. Social acceptance was measured sociometrically and the problem-solving skills measured included solutions generated for, attributions of partners' intent behind, and expectations of what would happen next in hypothetical social dilemmas. A total of 95 4- and 5-year old children from three different preschools completed the two tasks in two separate interviews.

The results indicate that perception of intent and the ability to predict the outcome of different social dilemmas may be important skills associated with differences in same-sex peer acceptance, but in different ways for one sex compared with the other. There were significant differences due to sex in the types of suggestions given for the protagonist, in what the child thought would happen next and in the perceived intent of the antagonist. There were also significant interactions between social acceptance and sex for expectations as to what would happen next as well as for perceived intent. The three social acceptance groups did not differ in the types of solutions they offered for the protagonist or how they said they would respond to a situation themselves or perceived intent. However, they did differ significantly in what they thought was likely to happen next.

Aims

Several recent studies have noted a relationship between higher risk of emotional and behavioral problems and rejection by one's peers. There have been many attempts to teach rejected and neglected children how to make friends and become more accepted by others. Unfortunately, many of these programs have fallen short of their goals. This could be either because of a failure to teach the targeted skills or because of a failure to target the correct skills.

Several researchers have focused on children's ability to propose possible solutions to social dilemmas as an important social problem-solving skill. Research with aggressive children has indicated that it may also be important to note the intent the child perceives as being behind his or her partner's behavior. In this study, we examined the relationship between popularity and:

(a) the types of solutions children generated to common social dilemmas,

(b) what they report they would do in similar situations,

(c) their statements regarding the participants' intent,

and (d) what they expected to happen next.

Method and Subjects

A total of 95 4- and 5-year-old children were recruited from three private preschools (a total of 7 different classrooms). During an individual interview, each child was presented with 12 drawings of common social dilemmas involving same-sex peers. They were asked what they thought the protagonist could do to solve the problem, what they themselves would do, and what they expected to happen next. The first 8 drawings were from the Social Knowledge Interview developed by S. R. Asher (1981). The last 4 situations were ambiguous as to the intent of the antagonist and children were asked what they thought had led up to the current situation and why they thought the other child had acted as he or she had done. The children's responses were categorized by two independent adult raters. The interrater agreement for these categories ranged from 95.8% to 97.7%.

In a second interview children were administered both a nomination and rating sociometric task using photos of all children in the class. The number of positive and negative nominations as well as the high and low ratings that each child received from same-sex peers were standardized within each class and were combined to sort children into high, middle or low peer acceptance groups.

Results

The children's responses were first analyzed to see if age, (4 versus 5 years old), sex, or birth order (only, oldest or laterborn) had a significant effect on any of the four social-problem solving questions asked. The different categories of response were converted to proportions of total responses given to control for between- child variability in responding. Threre were no significant differences due to age. The only significant difference due to birth order was on the question about perceived intent of the antagonist (multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(14.154) = 1.86$, $p < .034$). Laterborn children were the least likely to perceive social dilemma or conflict arising because the partner was not paying attention to what he or she was doing. Oldest children were the most likely to say they didn't know why the partner behaved the way he or she did.

There were significant differences due to sex in the types of suggestions given for the protagonist (multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(7,77) = 2.96$, $p < .008$), in what the child thought would happen next (multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(7,77) = 3.09$, $p < .006$), and in the perceived intent of the antagonist (multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(7,77) = 2.74$, $p < .014$) (see Table 1).

The three social acceptance groups did not differ in the types of solutions they offered for the protagonist or how they said they would respond to a situation themselves or in the types of intent the children perceived behind the antagonist's behavior. However, they did differ significantly in what they thought was likely to happen next (see Table 2).

There were significant interactions between social acceptance group and sex on perceived intent and what the child thought would happen next in the situation (see Table 3).

Conclusions

Generally, the type of solutions suggested by the children to the different social dilemmas and their reports of what they would do in those situations themselves did not differentiate between the social acceptance groups. However, the results indicate that perception of intent and the ability to predict the outcome of different social dilemmas may be important skills associated with differences in same-sex peer acceptance. They also indicate that 4- and 5-year-old boys and girls differ in how they interpret these situations--with girls being more likely to suggest some

specific outcome or make a hypothesis about possible intent and boys more likely to say that they don't know.

Finally the interaction of sex with social acceptance indicates that expectations about outcome and interpretation of intent may be different for popular boys compared to popular girls. Seeing positive outcomes and being unsure as to the partner's intent was more common with the popular boys than girls. They, on the other hand, were more likely to see outsiders as responsible for problems or perhaps a negative intent on the part of the partner rather than simple inattentiveness as being behind the hypothetical dilemmas. Looking at differences between popular boys and popular girls would be important in determining appropriate goals and interventions for social skill training programs.

Table 1
Significant Main Effects due to Sex in:

A. The Solutions Proposed to the Hypothetical Situation:

Univariate analyses of different types of solutions proposed:

	Sex of Child: Male	Female
Type of solution:		
1. Positive action.	.357	.457 ($p < .004$)
2. Passive/neutral.	.017	.013
3. Negative action.	.081	.072
4. Authority.	.128	.139
5. Withdrawal.	.010	.015
6. Other.	.067	.049
7. DK/NR.	.339	.255 ($p < .043$)

Summary:
Girls are more likely than boys to propose some sort of positive and prosocial solution while boys are more likely to say they don't know what to do.

B. - What the Child Expects Will Happen Next:

Univariate analyses of different types of solutions proposed:

	Sex of Child: Male	Female
Type of expectation:		
1. Positive outcome.	.346	.405
2. Passive/neutral.	.018	.047 ($p < .023$)
3. Negative outcome.	.137	.134
4. Authority.	.071	.074
5. Other activity.	.022	.046
6. Other.	.009	.025 ($p < .012$)
7. DK/NR.	.396	.268 ($p < .007$)

Summary:
Girls are more likely than boys to expect a passive outcome, such as one partner simply leaving the situation, or some other idiosyncratic response while boys are more likely to say they don't know what will happen next.

C. The Perceived Intent of the Social Partner

Univariate analyses of different types of intent attributed:

Type of intent:	Sex of Child: Male	Female
1. Not attending.	.017	.088 (p <.004)
2. Positive intent.	.096	.142
3. Negative intent.	.394	.432
4. Accident.	.112	.108
5. Outsider.	.009	.020
6. Other.	.154	.095
7. DK/NR.	.218	.115 (p <.035)

Summary:

Girls are more likely to assume the problem arose because the partner was not paying attention while boys are more likely to say they don't know why the partner behaved as he or she did.

Table 2
Significant Effects due to Social Acceptance on What Child Expects to Happen Next.

A. Based on combining high and low ratings:

Multivariate analysis:
multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(14,166) = 2.06$, $p < .016$

Univariate analyses of different types of intent attributed:

	Social acceptance group: High	Mid	Low
Type of expectation:			
1. Positive outcome.	.358	.366	.391
2. Passive/neutral.	.077	.022	.015 ($p < .0001$)
3. Negative outcome.	.139	.140	.117
4. Authority.	.077	.064	.106
5. Other activity.	.026	.035	.021
6. Other.	.031	.014	.006
7. DK/NR.	.292	.359	.345

B. Based on combining positive and negative nominations:

Multivariate analysis:
multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(14,166) = 2.59$, $p < .002$

Univariate analyses of different types of intent attributed:

	Social Acceptance Group: High	Mid	Low
Type of expectation:			
1. Positive outcome.	.315	.386	.332
2. Passive/neutral.	.104	.025	.012 ($p < .0001$)
3. Negative outcome.	.207	.131	.120
4. Authority.	.049	.064	.115
5. Other activity.	.009	.031	.044
6. Other.	.019	.014	.016
7. DK/NR.	.297	.349	.360

Summary:
Whether measured by combining ratings or nomimations, popular children were more likely than less popular children to expect the hypothetical situations to turn out in some neutral way such as one or the other partner resolving the problem by leaving.

Table 3
Significant Effects due to Interaction of Sex and Social Acceptance Group:
A. On What Child Expects to Happen Next.

1. Based on combining high and low ratings:

Multivariate analysis:
multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(14,166) = 2.05$, $p < .017$

Univariate analyses of different types of intent attributed:

	Social Acceptance Group: High		Mid		Low		
Sex:	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Type of expectation:							
1. Positive outcome.	.380	.325	.334	.408	.355	.536	
2. Passive/neutral.	.032	.144	.015	.032	.018	0000	($p < .004$)
3. Negative outcome.	.113	.178	.151	.126	.113	.131	
4. Authority.	.051	.115	.062	.065	.114	.075	
5. Other activity.	.036	.013	.022	.052	.014	.052	
6. Other.	.008	.066	.009	.019	.007	0000	
7. DK/NR.	.380	.158	.405	.298	.379	.206	

2. Based on number of positive nominations only:

Multivariate analysis:
multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(14,166) = 2.20$, $p < .0098$

Univariate analyses of different types of intent attributed:

	Social Acceptance Group: High		Mid		Low		
Sex:	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Type of expectation:							
1. Positive outcome.	.416	0000	.331	.421	.325	.386	($p < .007$)
2. Passive/neutral.	.033	.167	.019	.046	.005	.032	
3. Negative outcome.	.162	.107	.142	.137	.104	.112	
4. Authority.	.011	.167	.076	.079	.109	.029	
5. Other activity.	.006	0000	.027	.045	.025	.060	
6. Other.	0000	.167	.013	.017	.004	.047	($p < .001$)
7. DK/NR.	.372	.333	.392	.255	.428	.334	

Summary:

Basing social acceptance on number of positive nominations, popular boys were more likely than less popular boys to expect positive outcomes while popular girls were less likely to do so than less popular girls. Popular boys were less likely than less popular boys to give other more idiosyncratic responses while popular girls were more likely to do so than less popular girls.

Based on combining ratings, popular children were more likely than less popular children to expect neutral outcomes, such as one or

the other partner leaving the situation but this was significantly true more for girls than for boys.

B. The Perceived Intent of the Social Partner

1. Based on combining high and low ratings:
   Multivariate analysis:
      multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(14,166) = 2.43$, $p < .004$

Univariate analyses of different types of intent attributed:

	Social Acceptance Group: High		Mid		Low		
Sex:	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Type of intent:							
1. Not attending.	0000	.083	.027	.063	0000	.333	($p < .005$)
2. Positive intent.	.111	.083	.083	.152	.125	.167	
3. Negative intent.	.278	.625	.412	.402	.425	.333	($p < .044$)
4. Accident.	.139	.042	.081	.134	.188	0000	($p < .042$)
5. Outsider.	0000	.083	.007	.009	.021	0000	
6. Other.	.250	0000	.135	.125	.142	0000	
7. DK/NR.	.222	.083	.255	.116	.100	.167	

2. Based on combining positive and negative nominations:
   Multivariate analysis:
      multivariate Wilks' criterion $F(14,166) = 2.33$, $p < .0058$

Univariate analyses of different types of intent attributed:

	Social Acceptance Group: High		Mid		Low		
Sex:	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Type of intent:							
1. Not attending.	.083	.083	.007	.081	.017	.167	
2. Positive intent.	.083	.167	.069	.145	.167	.083	
3. Negative intent.	.250	.417	.426	.452	.373	.250	
4. Accident.	.083	0000	.108	.121	.133	.083	
5. Outsider.	0000	.167	.007	.008	.017	0000	($p < .011$)
6. Other.	.250	0000	.115	.113	.213	0000	
7. DK/NR.	.250	.167	.268	.081	.080	.417	($p <$ .013

Summary:

Based on combining high and low ratings, more popular girls wer less likely than unpopular girls to perceive what had happened as being a result of the partner failing to pay attention to what they were doing. There was no significant difference between more and les popular boys. More popular girls and less popular boys were the most likely to see negative intent behind the partner's actions. Boys at the extremes of popularity and girls in the middle were the most like ly what had happened as being the result of an accident.

Based on combining positive and negative nominations, less popu lar boys were less likely than more popular boys to say they did not

know why the partner had acted the way he or she had. The opposite seemed to be true for girls. More popular girls were more likely to see some sort of outside force or intruder as being responsible for the current problem situation.